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The sustainable metropolis: when night enlightens day

Luc Gwiazdzinski (*)

The night is a wonderful space for renewal and replenishment, for invention and new projects for our changing cities, and for their inhabitants in search points of reference. It is time to put the night firmly on the agenda and anticipate the inevitable development of night-time activities, with the aim of thinking seriously about the overall development of the 24-hour city and a new form of sensory, temporal and temporary urbanism.

The night: a temporal space under pressure

Urban nights are not deserts. In the unique temporal space that is the night, a part of social and economic life is now forever awake, creating other centralities and sociabilities. From illuminations to all-night cultural events, power cuts, unsafe roads, noise pollution, light pollution and urban violence, the night makes its way into the daytime news, for better or for worse. Over the last 15 years or so, the colonisation of the urban night-time has been accelerating and we have seen a gradual “diurnisation” of the night with the arrival of mundane daytime activities. The frontier between day and night is moving and pressure is growing under the effects of the non-stop nature of the economy and various networks. The night, like other traditional periods of rest, such as Sundays or lunch breaks, is gradually being eroded by human activity.

Businesses run continuously in order to optimise their production facilities, while financial markets and the internet never stop. Light has gradually taken possession of the urban space, partly erasing the threatening darkness of our nights, allowing the prolongation of regular activities and the transformation of the public space. The night-time economy continues to develop and the key players of this economy are becoming more organised. In Europe, night work now concerns almost 18% of employees, mainly men. In many countries, legislation on stores’ opening hours has been relaxed, although in France the subject remains controversial, as illustrated by recent rulings (and sanctions) on store chains that stay open after 9 p.m. One consequence of these developments has been that the urban night has become nothing more than a three-hour lull in the activity of large cities.

Although the night is not as dangerous as we are led to believe, neither is it the space of freedom and encounters dreamed of by poets. As we advance into the night, the options on offer decrease, and the city shrinks and seems to condense itself into a few clusters of streets where we find concentrations of illumination and animation. The night is expensive, and any sense of social and generational diversity is illusory. Reduced public transport limits night-time use of the metropolis and movement between centre and suburbs.

Colonised by light and daytime activities, the night – outpost of the day – is the scene of

temporal conflicts between different neighbourhoods, activities, groups and individuals within the city. The city that sleeps, the city that parties and the city that works do not always make good bedfellows. Tensions arise in the archipelago of urban nights, and borders are built up that challenge and compromise harmonious living.

Night-time, sustainable development and innovation

The night reveals humankind in all its paradoxes. This presents a major challenge for the public authorities, who have to engage debate and discussions in order to promote sustainable nocturnal development, which seeks to balance economic development, environmental concerns, social cohesion and culture. It is in the urban night, that curious temporal space, that the tensions and contradictions between the economic and the social, environment and culture, are probably most visible. It is in this space that part of our ability to live together comes into play. Improving our quality of urban life cannot come at the expense of other individuals in the city and in the world, or indeed of future generations.

By masking this debate, or by dismissing it as belonging exclusively to the private sphere of our lives, the economy will dictate its law to the weakest among us, who do not have the option of choosing between a taxing night job and unemployment.

Far from the constraints of the day, the night is a living laboratory, enabling us to reinvent the daytime and imagine cities that are generally more accessible and hospitable. The concepts of centrality, diversity, urbanity, identity, accessibility, hospitality and habitability must be reconsidered in terms of the nocturnal and the temporary. The night, which falls within the remit of everyone and no one, can transcend institutional boundaries, and forces us to think laterally. It calls upon essential sensory dimensions, and allows us to incorporate users and artistic know-how into the production of the metropolis, and to imagine a public policy for the night that strikes a balance between the “right to the city” and the “right to the night”.

An opportunity to think differently

Addressing night-time sustainable development calls for a salutary change of outlook. We can move from the vision of a dangerous territory to be controlled to one of a project space to be developed; from the commodification and spectacularisation of the night based on territorial marketing to a more humane approach; from hurried, unplanned management of usage conflicts to the long-term, strategic consideration of harmonious urban living according to different time frames; from the fun-filled night of revellers to the humdrum night of shift workers; from a sector-based approach to an integrated, transversal approach that takes account of the economic, social, environmental and cultural dimensions of the urban system; from conventional urban planning to time-oriented urban planning; and from a – supposedly rational – diurnal way of thinking to a more sensitive and uncertain nocturnal way of thinking.

Beginning the process of re-examining the urban night means learning to manage the paradoxes of a hyper-modern metropolis by accommodating the needs of all: illuminating the night without causing it to disappear completely under a continuous sheet of light;

preserving its original identity and its mystery; developing night-time activity without creating new usage conflicts; ensuring public safety without imposing curfews; opening up the night to economic activity while safeguarding the health of workers; ensuring a continuity between centre and suburbs without homogenising the way the city is used at night; regulating nightlife while allowing room for transgression; leaving some things unregulated without abandoning the night to market forces. It is up to us to decide, together, “how far not to go”.

Finally, making the most of the urban night means meeting the comfort- and information-related needs of all of its users, paying particular attention to those who are most excluded from it: women who have little access to the night, homeless people, young people and older people, isolated individuals with health problems, night workers, and residents of far-flung suburbs.

Initial experiments

Faced with these rapid changes, some cities adapt and experiment. Around the world, the trend is towards an increase in the frequency and service span of public transport, accompanied by the development of shared transport. From Paris to Montreal, the success of Nuit Blanche [1] events continues to grow. In Helsinki, night-time crèches have existed for many years now. In Spain, social, cultural and sports facilities and leisure opportunities for young people continue into the night, with positive effects on juvenile delinquency. In the UK, nightlife forms part of cities’ marketing strategies and urban revitalisation programmes. Oslo and Rotterdam are experimenting with flexible and interactive lighting. Macau boasts of its airport open night and day, Hong Kong’s public services are available online 24 hours a day, Rome proudly offers a citizen enquiry line that is open at all times, Paris still believes it is the “City of Light” and, for 2014, London is promising round-the-clock public transport. From Las Vegas to Ibiza, whole territories are specialised in 24/7 partying and nightlife. Around the world, cities wishing to attract businesses, tourists, students and the creative classes have incorporated the night into their territorial marketing strategies.

Elsewhere, mediation devices, “correspondants de nuit” (“**night-time mediators**”), “chuchoteurs” (“whisperers”) and “night-time charters” are being invented and help to pacify relations between residents and revellers and imagine other ways of organising and configuring the city at night. Major night-time events are an opportunity to experiment with new policies relating to culture, transport, lighting and public order, together with new partnerships between the public and private sectors. In Paris, Geneva and Lausanne, “General Assemblies of the Night” (États généraux de la nuit) have helped to initiate debate and outline a future night-time public space that corresponds to what Habermas described as “a symbolic place where public opinion is formed, as the result of political debate and the public use of reason”.

Everywhere, outside formal frameworks, users are creating and inventing. It is often at night that the world is set to rights and that people are able to break free from the constraints that the technical, rational daytime seeks to impose. It is at night that they distort and reuse objects and codes, reclaiming space and usages, in order to create a

functional and metaphorical city that resists the dominant city. During the night-time – a lived-in, ephemeral and cyclic low-density territory – solutions are invented and developed that welcome a do-it-yourself attitude, the vernacular, little arrangements and exchanges here and there, “tricks”, swaps, sharing and other frugal innovations that may also be of interest to the daytime city.

An integrated approach and new urbanism

Beyond these scattered initiatives, it is essential to develop an overall public policy regarding the night in order to “manage public needs and problems, and create policy”.

The night is of concern to everyone and is intimately linked to everyday life; it calls for partnerships and is an alternative means of approaching the creation of the city. It is an opportunity to break down the barriers between research and experimentation, between the city centre and “beyond the city”, through the creation of “open urban innovation platforms” focused on creativity that bring together researchers, public authorities, professionals, artists and citizens, and which make it possible to envisage a comprehensive approach in terms of the economy, social affairs, the environment and culture.

As true living observatories, these platforms could allow us to imagine a specific form of night-time governance. Potential areas for development could be: facilitating appropriation of the night by producing accurate maps of the night-time facilities and activities on offer; giving night workers, going about their jobs unseen in the shadow of diurnal corporate governance, the recognition they deserve; maintaining calm and tranquillity through natural social control linked to human presence; expanding and diversifying urban facilities by, for example, opening parks, gardens and other public places at night; improving the comfort and user-friendliness of spaces through versatile street furniture that is adapted to its environment; introducing night-time public services and defining a “time ecology” whereby each and every one of us can make the most of our everyday life at night. As William Grossin points out, we are entitled to the respect of natural temporal environments, to which our biological organisms have adapted over millennia (Grossin 1996).

When night enlightens day!

Through observation and awareness, projects and experiments, the night can – somewhat paradoxically – shed a new light on the city. Beyond statistical and organisational questions, between percepts and concepts, we must first of all experience the night, explore it in order to make the most of it, and agree to let go and let ourselves be enveloped by it and come round to a nocturnal way of thinking, a “trembling thought” – in the words of Martinican writer Édouard Glissant – that contrasts with the certainties of day. In this sense, politicians, researchers, technicians and motivated citizens can turn to the night to refresh their outlook and perhaps discover the beginnings of possible futures for cities and society. Whether it is in terms of the economy, social affairs, the environment or culture, a part of the future of our metropolises already lies, waiting to be revealed, in the urban night.

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